

For the last few weeks, the Online Lessons from Auschwitz Project has been being taught to hundreds of students across the UK. During this, we learn about the importance of remembering the Holocaust, the victims and survivors, and how it historically relates to today. We were taught through a series of modules, and online sessions, one of which where we met and heard the testimony of Holocaust Survivor Mala Tribich MBE.

When discussing the Holocaust, some historians have a tendency to focus on numbers, facts and battle lines. They focus on the victims of the Holocaust as victims, inadvertently removing focus from the actual people. When defining the Holocaust and its events, we must take into account the millions of people affected. Such a number is incomprehensible, yet all were individual people, with families, hopes and dreams before their lives were inextricably changed forever.

“The Holocaust was the persecution and the attempted systemic genocide of the Jewish people, by the Nazi’s and their collaborators”.

Though the term ‘Holocaust’ predates the Second World War, it has now become synonymous with the systemic deaths of the Jewish, Polish, Romani and countless other nationalities, groups and identities. It is imperative to note the importance of remembering each and every person rather than an impersonal statistic. This was made clear to me during the first lesson which was an online module.

We were to look at and read a series of case studies about Jewish people before the Holocaust. One couple in particular stood out to me, Ota and Katerina Margolius. Both from Czech, Ota and Katerina were both successful, and well established, Ota being a member of the Czech National Field Hockey team and Katerina was a hat maker. During the Holocaust, Ota was murdered on the way to Auschwitz, while Katerina survived her time at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, where she was liberated. Seeing the photograph of Ota and Katerina, smiling together in a cafe made me realise that the victims and survivors of the Holocaust are more than what happened to them. It made me understand the importance of seeing and hearing about Jewish lives before the Holocaust and how every single person deserves equal remembrance.

Before the Holocaust, Jewish life throughout Europe was vast and each community expressed their identity in different ways. Across Poland alone, the Jewish population was 3,300,000 people, who made up 10% of the total population of Poland. The town of Oswiecim, located in Poland, would be renamed ‘Auschwitz’ when under Nazi occupation. Before the establishment of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oswiecim had a large Jewish population of 58%.

Oswiecim was a place of culture and full of celebrations centred in the market square where each community could socialise. During the celebration of Simchat Torah, which celebrates the beginning of the new cycle of Torah readings, many people in Oswiecim would dance around the central statue of Saint John. Former Jewish Resident Rachel Jakimowski, remembers the celebration to be that of “symbolic” and “joyful”. The square of Oswiecim was the centre of Jewish culture, with Synagogues, and the Herz Hotel. The Herz Hotel was the building of “cultural and political life” which held political meetings, performances, events and lectures. The Hotel was open to people from all cultures, inviting both Christian and Jewish individuals. Life in the Oswiecim, and many towns were vibrant and there was a mutual appreciation between Christian Residents and the Jewish Residents with both decorating their

windows on the other's celebrations according to former resident, Marta Swiderska. Generally, in the town, many of its people were friendly and welcoming. Through rediscovering some of the culture of the Jewish people of Oswiecim before the Holocaust, we can re-establish an emotional connection and see them in a new context, that they had a life and community before the Nazi's and their collaborators, which allows us to see them in a humanised way.

It is incredibly important to remember Jewish culture before the Holocaust because the Nazi's and their collaborators not only attempted to eradicate the Jewish people, but also their culture and customs.

While we must remember life before the Holocaust, it is also equally important to honour the individual experiences by both survivors and victims.

Mala Tribich is a Holocaust survivor and an inspiration to those who have heard her testimony. Mala was born in 1930 in Piotrkow Trybunalski, Poland. Mala described her life before the Holocaust as "very happy" with her Parents, older brother, Ben and younger sister. Following the invasion of Poland, Mala's hometown held the first established ghetto in Poland, where Mala and her family had to move into. During this time, rooms were shared and cramped with as many as 10 people to a room. She described it as being "deprived of the most basic human rights." There was very little food, school was stopped for children and those over 12 were forced to wear a blue Star of David. During deportations, Mala's Father and Uncle decided it would be safer for her and her cousin, Idzia, to be taken out of the ghetto until they were over. Mala was taken first, then Idzia, as it was very dangerous to take two Jewish children on the train, and they went to stay with a couple in the city of Czystochowa. While there, Mala was desperate to see her family, and so was Idzia. Idzia told the couple of good friends of her parents who she could stay with, so they took her to them. When the deportation period had calmed down in the ghetto, it was decided that Mala could return to her family, and a meeting point was organised on the top floor of a flour mill. When they arrived, she was met by her Father and Uncle, who asked where his daughter Idzia was. Her cousin was never seen again, and Mala and her family never knew what happened to her.

Once returned to the ghetto, Mala's mother and young sister were taken during a round up and killed in the forest. Mala's Aunt had also been taken, so she looked after and cared for her 5-year-old cousin, Ann. In 1944, with the deportation of all the Jews in the ghetto, Mala was separated from her Father and Brother and was taken to Ravensbruck with her cousin. Months later, Mala and her cousin were taken to Bergen-Belsen. Due to the horrific conditions, Mala soon contracted Typhus and was very ill upon liberation by the British. Once Mala had recovered, she received a letter from her brother Ben, who had lived and now resided in England. She reunited with him in 1947 and also met her husband, Maurice in 1949 with whom she had children. Mala has shared her testimony to many schools, and communities, emphasising the importance of remembering.

Mala's story is that of resilience, courage and bravery. To hear and share a survivor's story like Mala's is a unique privilege.

It shows us that the victims of the Holocaust were so much more than just victims, they were, and are, Siblings, Daughters, Sons, and Cousins. They were Hockey players, hat makers, and became parents. There are people behind the statistics, names and faces who all deserve remembrance. They are more than the Holocaust. They must be remembered for who they were. Mala, an inspiration, Ota, a hockey player who loved Katerina, a hat maker. So many have been given their names back

in the Book of Names in Auschwitz-Birkenau, yet so many still remain nameless. We cannot forget those who do.

To sum up entire lives, though some were cut very short, as victims, is to do those lives a great disservice.

We must remember.